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GOP leadership officials and the RSC have battled over the years on various issues, ranging from the budget to Medicare. That conflict has sometimes led to friction between GOP leaders and the RSC chairman.

And if history is any guide, whoever is tapped as RSC chairman will not be a House Republican leader years from now. The three contenders who are in the running to head the RSC are Reps. Marsha Blackburn (Tenn.), John Campbell (Calif.) and Tom Price (Ga.).

Among recent lawmakers who headed the RSC, only ex-Rep. Tom DeLay (Texas) ascended to a top leadership position.

DeLay said that under his guidance, the committee was “a thorn in the side of leadership” but rather than hurting him within the party, DeLay’s popularity grew.

“You can never forget that you are a leader of 100 conservatives. You weren’t a leader of four or five and you have to reflect the views of 100 members,” DeLay said.

Rep. Mike Pence (Ind.) began his tenure as chairman in 2004 as a member of the majority party.

He soon became a fixture on C-SPAN, railing on the House floor against GOP spending practices. Pence's aggressive leadership of the RSC did not sit well with then-Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.).

Pence's criticism of GOP leaders attracted a lot of media attention, but his stock in the conference did not soar. After the 2006 elections, he opted to challenge Rep. John Boehner (R-Ohio) for the top GOP post in the House — and was beaten soundly.

"To lead is to choose and to choose is sometimes to alienate," Pence said.

He contended that the position is no different from any other leadership position and that the RSC is defined largely by its chairman.

Pence said he stood up for curbing spending, adding, "I spent a lot of time battling leadership and the White House."

"Did I alienate them at the time? Maybe," Pence said. "Did some of them think I was right after 2006? Definitely.

"That's the cost of leadership."

Rep. John Shadegg (Ariz.), who served as the Republican policy chairman in the 109th Congress after leading the RSC from 2000 to 2002, fell short when he challenged Boehner and Rep. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) for majority leader in 2006.

Asked if the chairmanship affected his majority leader bid, Shadegg laughed and said, "I found lots of obstacles.

"If you are on the ideological fringe of the conference, it's hard to be the leader of the conference," Shadegg added.

Rep. Jeb Hensarling (Texas) has been particularly aggressive during his term as RSC chairman. His criticism of earmarks has created some awkward positions for Boehner and his leadership team, which has struggled to balance conservative calls for reform with the needs of politically vulnerable members and appropriators.

But running the RSC while in the minority generally leads to less friction with GOP leaders, who are looking for widespread unity to battle the Democratic majority. For example, the RSC and GOP leaders worked together on budget issues during this Congress. In contrast to previous years, the RSC has opted to back the leadership budget resolutions in the 110th Congress instead of seeking a vote on its own proposals.

“Whether people choose to believe it or not, it’s a matter that I haven’t really given much thought to,” Hensarling said when asked if he thought the post would affect his future.

Hensarling said his chairmanship reflected who he was as a person and as a lawmaker, adding that he would continue to advocate for the conservative cause in whatever role he had in the conference.

“Let the chips fall where they may,” he said.

Asked whether his push for earmark reform and a moratorium would lead him to seek a higher office, Hensarling responded, “I ain’t going anywhere.”

Campbell said the notion that the RSC chairmanship could preclude him from rising further up the leadership food chain doesn’t concern him.

“I’m just not worried about it,” Campbell said, adding that he rarely thinks about consequences for actions or decisions he believes to be right.

“I’m OK either way,” he said.